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Book Review: Resilient Participation. Saving the Human Project?

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Resilient Participation. Saving the Human Project?

Bell, S. and Morse, S

Routledge (<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9781849712552/>)

27 Mar 2012, 180 pp.

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This is a book about the application of a resilient, that is particularly strong or 'tough' (p.43), participatory approach to project work. It intends to fill a gap in knowledge around how and why some groups perform better than others and to use this learning for future practice. All very general yes, but the authors locate this in a wider context that is the 'Human Project'. Faced with significant challenges in the future, their endeavor is positioned with concern for the outlook of the human race. They aim to 'help groups explore their current situation and develop a path by which they can improve their functioning and ultimately make a positive contribution to the lives of others' (p.4).

As the authors point out, the notion of participation has for some time been of interest across a range of disciplines. Consequently many books and articles have been written in the past on this subject from the perspective of policymakers, practitioners and researchers (see for instance Cooke and Kothari 2001; Baum 1999; Lewis et al 1998; The World Bank 1997; Mannion 1996; Croft and Beresford 1992). The authors recognize that there are doubtless readers who may complain that particular swathes of literature are missing. It is unlikely that a single volume will encompass the full breadth of literature on participation and the book is not attempting a comprehensive review. Instead it seeks to identify ways in which participation may be more effective as a result of better outcomes and superior processes. This is an entirely admirable objective and one which perhaps persuades me of the value of the book overall.

The authors are clear in that they wish to analyse the importance of group efficacy and to do so they borrow heavily from the psychodynamic and systems traditions. The result is the Triple Task approach that combines these methodologies. It facilitates an

analysis of the degree to which any group achieves its objectives while also scrutinizing the workings of that group. This latter aspect is considered from the perspective of group participants as well as from the vantage of external facilitators. Anyone who has worked at length with groups will value such concern – group politics and individual preferences can make or break activities.

I really welcomed the spirit of the book and its aspirations. I did however find myself somewhat at odds with particular details. One was the authors' tendency to make sweeping generalisations and assumptions. For instance they seem to rely heavily on the use of Rich Pictures as a means of unraveling particular issues. But the use of Rich Pictures may not be for everyone- participants on project activity will be stimulated by different approaches. This could have been more explicit because later the authors do provide what they describe as a limited list of these on pages 27&28. Meanwhile throughout the book there appears to be an implicit assumption that participation can only be measured through physical involvement in public events. However as we know from rural development discourse this is not always appropriate or desirable (see for example Derksen et al. 2008; Shortall 2005). This exemplifies the broad-brush approach that is given to participation and it detracts from the central purpose of the book: is an analysis of the technical aspects of the performance of participation. Other gaps exist within the book. The definition and description of stakeholders seemed to be lacking: it does not provide a robust overview of the concept. It is overly simplified and leaves more issues unexplained than it serves to illuminate. As a reader I really wanted to explore where stakeholders get their power. Power is mentioned but never really explored except to equate it to money without any explanation of how this connection was made. The text provoked other questions - what of the legitimacy of stakeholders' interests? Who are the stakeholders,

how are they represented and how will they participate – for instance is the concept of democracy relevant? Open ended questions relating to who participates, why individuals participate and who drives participatory agendas will not be dealt with through the Triple Task methodology.

But these equivocations are not to detract from the way in which participation is illuminated. Ultimately this is not a book about power, politics and underlying reasons for *why* groups act in the way that they do. It is an examination of *how* groups perform and how the individuals within those groups interact. Readers can expect a very detailed examination into the way in which groups reach the conclusions that they do. The text provides charts and diagrams to help explain these processes and it examines some of the trickier aspects of group work including the challenges of using indicators. It should perhaps be more clearly stated from the outset that this is what the book is about thereby ensuring expectations are aligned with content.

The book is very easily read and employs the use of analogies throughout (e.g. p. 10 describes garnishes on the plate of human achievement) making comprehension of the underpinning concept straightforward. In general good use is made of diagrams, tables and illustrations, and it is likely to appeal to individuals with a fondness for these modes of presentation. It will have most appeal to practitioners and will also be of interest to those engaged in studies that encompass participation including planning and community development.

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